**Attitudes and Policies: Immigration in American History**

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On Thanksgiving Day, 1795, President George Washington called upon Americans to pray for their new nation to become "more and more a safe and propitious asylum for the unfortunate of other countries." The U.S. population at the time was somewhere between 4 and 5 million people. But not long after the president's call at least one Congressman argued that the U.S. was fully populated and needed to control immigration. Three years later Congress passed the Alien Acts. They increased the residence requirement for citizenship from five to fourteen years and gave President Adams the power to deport foreigners.

Right from the beginning of U.S. history Americans expressed conflicting attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Through the decades, many people have felt proud that their country has offered a haven for people seeking freedom and opportunity; others have feared what they believe is ignorance or radical ideas among new immigrants. Many have welcomed hard-working people who build roads, canals, and buildings; others have resisted the presence of those who might take their jobs. Many have celebrated the melting pot, others have exhibited bigotry based on religion, social standing and skin color that has at times turned violent.

Italian and Jewish immigrants, the latter mostly from Russia, along with others from Southern and Eastern Europe, began arriving in large numbers in the 1880s and 1890s. Most were poor, dressing differently and with different customs from the immigrants of Northern Europe—Britons, Scandinavians, Germans. A New York newspaper expressed distaste for "Hebrew immigrants who lounge about Battery Park, obstructing the walks and sitting on the chains. Their filthy condition has caused many of the people who are accustomed to go to the park to seek a little recreation and fresh air to give up this practice." (John Higham, Strangers in the Land )

In Colorado, three Italians were dragged from jail and hanged. In New Orleans,11 were lynched. Workers at a New Jersey glass factory rioted when 14 Russian Jews were hired. In Mississippi, farmhouses belonging to Jewish landlords were burned.

Tens of thousands of Asian immigrants in California, especially the Chinese, suffered from the racism of white supremacist ideas about a "Yellow Peril." In the **Chinese Exclusion Act** of 1882, Congress, for the first time, banned an entire national group from entering the country. And in 1907 President **Theodore Roosevelt** made an agreement with the Japanese government, which pledged to prevent any more Japanese from leaving Japan for America.

But there was also strong support for immigrant labor among business groups and associations. "Tremendous technological advances mechanized many industries so extensively that inexperienced foreigners could tend semi-automatic machines without understanding them, writes John Higham in Strangers in the Land. The Wall Street Journal and other business publications "rejoiced over the immigrants. America, they chorused, is still a growing place full of opportunity for an expanding population." As late as 1910, Higham notes, "a new Colorado Board of Immigration was enticing Italian farmers to the state." Prosperous cotton farmers in the South tried to attract immigrants, as did owners of expanding Southern railroads. In the North the demand was for factory labor.

But before and immediately after World War I, as immigrants from Southeastern Europe continued to pour into the country, labor groups like the American Federation of Labor and nativists began campaigning for significant immigration restriction. Union leaders worried about unemployment after American soldiers began coming home from Europe. Nativists stressed their belief that it would be impossible to assimilate and Americanize so many foreigners and expressed fear of foreign radicals. Meanwhile, immigration supporters emphasized America as the home of the oppressed, and the Knights of Columbus sponsored books on "immigrant gifts" to the country.

In 1921 and again in 1924, persuaded that the time had come for immigration restrictions, Congress passed quota laws. The **National Origins Ac**t of 1924 set immigration quotas by nationality based on the 1890 census. The result was that no more than 100 people could come from any African country or China; 125 could come from Lithuania but 51,227 were allowed from nearby Germany; 2,248 from Russia; 3,845 from Italy; and 34,007 from England. (Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States ) And in 1929 total immigration was limited to 150,000 persons a year.

The U.S. **Great Depression** of the 1930s pumped up anti-immigrant sentiment. During a 1930s anti-immigrant campaign, according to USA Today, "Tens of thousands and possibly more than 400,000 Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were pressured-through raids and job denials-to leave the USA... Many, mostly children, were U.S. citizens."

At the time of the Japanese attack on **Pearl Harbor** in 1941, about 110,000 people of Japanese background lived on the West Coast. Seventy thousand were in their late teens and early twenties. Born in the U.S., they were American citizens. The other 40,000 were older people and not citizens because U.S. law did not permit them to be. Early in 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the removal of all these people of Japanese descent.

They had to leave their homes and places of business with few belongings and were housed in desert areas of California and other Western states. The last of these "relocation centers" was not closed until 1946. It took a struggle of more than 40 years for these Japanese-Americans to receive an apology from the U.S. government (in 1988) and $20,000 in reparations for loss of liberty and property.

Not until 1965 did a new law abolish national origin and race quota systems. The **Immigration and Nationality Act** instead set overall limits for each hemisphere, and set up a preference system based on family connections and employment skills. Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens were allowed to enter the country and become citizens. Following 1965, the major source of immigration to the U.S. shifted from Europe to North America and Asia, reversing a trend that predated the founding of the nation.

In the late 1970’s, the U.S. saw an increase in the number of refugees fleeing communist regimes in the Soviet Union, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. To provide a more orderly system for the admission and resettlement of refugees, Congress passed the **Refugee Act** of 1980. It used the United Nations’ definition of refugees as anyone “who flees a country because of persecution…on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a specific social group, or political opinion.” It allowed the president the power to determine the number of refugee visas given out, and authorized federal assistance for the resettlement of refugees.

In 1986 the **Immigration Reform and Control Act** granted amnesty to 2.7 million illegal immigrants, allowing them to become citizens. The measure also imposed fines on employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers.

Today there are 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. Many work in temporary jobs and are open to exploitation and mistreatment because they are here illegally. Employers can make them work harder than citizens and pay them less (and in some cases, cheat them out of their earnings altogether). As illegals, they have virtually no chance at organizing and/or joining unions.

Today there is a new turn in the centuries-old immigration debate, as thousands and thousands of demonstrators across the country demand that all immigrants have "a shot at the American dream." Meanwhile, fears about the impact of immigration, both legal and illegal, remain a potent political motivation for others.